

appendix I

how to spot a world-class education

Like most reporters, I'd rather not give advice; I prefer to just relate other people's stories and let you form your own conclusions. That is better for everyone.

And yet. Everywhere I go, parents ask me for specific action items that they can actually use in real life. They ask me at the supermarket, they ask me at the playground. It's as if they live in the real world, where prose is not all that matters.

In most countries, most parents have some choice as to where to send their children to school. It is a very hard choice, however, and useful information is shamefully hard to find. So, here is my best attempt to deliver what the people want.

Every child is different. An outstanding school for one child would be hell on earth for another. Still, when it comes to finding a school that is both rigorous and alive, full of spirit and learning, there are a few reliable questions to ask. Here is my cheat sheet to finding a world-class school based on what I have seen from visiting schools on four continents, listening to kids, teachers, and parents and studying

the research of other, smarter people than myself. It is incomplete, but it is a start.

watch the students

If you are trying to understand a school, you can ignore most of the information you are given. Open houses? Pretty much useless. Spending per student? Beyond a certain baseline level, money does not translate into quality in education anywhere. The smartest countries in the world spend less per pupil than the United States.

Average class size? Not as important as most people think, except in the earliest years of schooling. In fact, the highest-performing countries typically have larger classes than the United States. The research shows that the quality of the teaching matters more than the size of the class.

Test data? More helpful, but very hard to decipher in most places. How good is the test? How much value is the school adding beyond what kids are already learning at home? More and more U.S. school districts have this kind of information, but do not make it public.

Instead, the best way to gauge the quality of a school is to spend time—even just twenty minutes—visiting classrooms while school is in session.

When you get there, though, it's important to know where to look. Parents tend to spend a lot of time staring at the bulletin boards in classrooms. Here is a better idea: Watch the students instead.

Watch for signs that *all* the kids are paying attention, interested in what they are doing, and working hard. Don't check for signs of order; sometimes learning happens in noisy places where the kids are working in groups without much input from the teacher. Some of the worst classrooms are quiet, tidy places that look, to adults, reassuringly calm.

Remember that rigorous learning actually looks rigorous. If the kids are whizzing through a worksheet, that's not learning. That's fill-

ing out a form. Kids should be uncomfortable sometimes; that's okay. They should not be frustrated or despairing; instead, they should be getting help when they need it, often from each other. They should not spend long, empty stretches of time getting in line for lunch, sitting down for circle time, or handing out papers. There should be a sense of urgency that you can feel.

Resist the urge to focus on the teacher. In the best classrooms in the world, the teacher might be quiet. Or charismatic or even a tiny bit crazy (as most of us remember from our own school days). What you think of the teacher during a short visit is not as important as what the kids think after watching her all year.

I did this in every nation I visited. How interested were the students in my arrival? Engaged kids didn't take much notice; they had more important things to do. Bored kids looked back and smiled, offered a shy wave, and handed me a tissue if I sneezed. Their time was being wasted, and they were desperate for a distraction.

I saw bored kids in every country. Boredom is the specter that haunts children from kindergarten to graduation on every continent. In American classrooms, I watched a girl draw a beautiful rose tattoo on her arm with a ballpoint pen; she did it slowly, meticulously, as though she were serving a life sentence. I saw a young boy dance silently in his bright white high-tops under his desk. His upper body never moved.

In Finland, I saw a teenage boy take unusual interest in the cord of the window blinds next to him, as if it were a ripcord that might parachute him into another place. In Korea, I saw rows of students sleeping—flat-out REM sleeping—with their heads upon the desks. Some had pillows. Korea was where boredom went to sleep, and got up later to study all night.

Boredom varied wildly from one classroom to the next, usually within the same school. In the best schools, though, boredom was the exception rather than the norm. You could walk into five classrooms

and see just one or two students who had drifted away, mentally or physically, rather than eight or ten. That's how you know that you are in a place of learning.

talk to the students

People, including reporters, rarely ask students for their insight. Everyone focuses on the teacher, the principal, the building, or the bulletin boards. Young kids are thought to be too small to understand; older kids are presumed to be too jaded. Neither is true, in my experience. As long as you ask intelligent questions, students are the most candid and helpful sources in any school.

Don't ask, "Do you like this teacher?" or "Do you like your school?" What if a tall, smiling stranger came to your office and asked, "Do you like your boss?" You'd wonder if he was a consultant brought in to fire you. Kids have the same reaction. And in any case, liking a teacher is not the same as learning from a teacher. Instead, ask questions that are specific, respectful, and meaningful.

The first thing I usually ask is straightforward: *What are you doing right now? Why?*

You'd be amazed how many kids can answer the first question but not the second. The second question is imperative, however. To buy into school, kids need to be reminded of the purpose all day, everyday.

In 2011, an epic Gates Foundation research study found that kids' answers to specific questions were surprisingly predictive of student test-score growth and more reliable over time than classroom observations by trained observers. Tens of thousands of students of all ages were asked to agree or disagree with thirty-six different items on that particular survey (the Tripod Survey designed by Ronald Ferguson at Harvard). When you are visiting a school, you obviously cannot conduct a scientifically valid survey like this. But the questions that most correlated with student learning in that study

might help shape questions that would be worth asking anyway. For example:

1. In this class, do you learn a lot every day?
2. Do students in this class usually behave the way your teacher wants them to?
3. Does this class stay busy and not waste time?

Those are the kinds of questions that students—and only students—can answer.

Some schools have started using variations of this same survey to help teachers improve, a smart and relatively cheap idea. If a principal or teacher uses this kind of classroom-level survey *and* spends significant time studying the results and learning to do better, that is a promising sign.

And here's one more question to ask students, this one supplied by Dwan Jordon, former principal of John P. Sousa Middle School in Washington, D.C.: *If you don't understand something, what do you do?*

In rigorous classrooms, kids know the answer.

listen to the parents

In 2011, I took a tour of a Washington, D.C., private school that was hard to get into and cost about \$30,000 a year. I really couldn't afford the school, but I'd already visited many public schools and charter schools, and I wanted to know what my child might be missing.

Sunlight streamed through the skylights. As I walked down the hall, the sound of kids learning in different languages filtered out into the hallway. There were muffins in the principal's office. It felt like a learning spa—a parent's dream.

But strange things happened on this visit. When the head of the school talked, nothing she said made sense to me. There was a lot of jargon about the curriculum and vague promises of wondrous field

trips and holistic projects. All the visiting parents nodded; I got the sense that no one wanted to say anything off key that might hurt a child's admission chances.

Then a parent with three children at this school took us for a tour. We saw gleaming floors, bright, colorful walls, beautiful, framed art projects, and other seductive tokens. Finally, one visiting father asked a good question:

"Every school has its weaknesses. What is this school's weakness?"

I lifted my head, straining to hear what our tour guide would say.

"You know, I'd have to say the math program is weak."

I was speechless. Imagine visiting a tony private hospital that only admitted healthy patients who could afford its services, and finding out the surgery practice was weak. What did it mean if the math program was weak at a school that made small children take I.Q. tests before they were even accepted? That particular parent wrote a check each year for about \$90,000 to this school to cover the tuition for her three children. Wouldn't she demand decent math classes in exchange?

But no one said anything. Maybe all the parents were stunned, as I was. Then the tour guide parent added one more thing:

"Oh, and I wish the football program was stronger."

Suddenly, the parents perked up.

"Really, what do you mean? Is there not a football team? What age does it start?"

I wandered out into the parking lot, mystified. Perhaps this explained why our most affluent kids scored eighteenth in math compared to affluent kids worldwide: Even wealthy American parents didn't care about math as much as football.

That was a big difference between America and Finland, Korea, and Poland. In the world's education superpowers, parents agreed that a rigorous education was critical to their kids' life chances.

Wherever you live, if you can find a community or school where parents and educators share this baseline belief, then you have found

something more valuable to more children than the best football program on earth.

As you search for a world-class school, ask parents at each place to talk about the school's weaknesses. Listen carefully. If parents say they are very involved in the school, ask them *how*. American parents tend to be more involved in school than parents in the education superpowers, but not, generally speaking, in ways that lead to learning.

Raising money, going to soccer games, and serving on teacher-appreciation committees are wonderful things to do. They do not, however, tend to impact the quality of your child's education, as documented throughout this book.

Around the world, parents have dramatic influence on how their children learn. But Parent Teacher Association meetings are not where that learning happens. The research shows that parents who are most active in their children's schools do not tend to raise smarter children. The real impact happens mostly at home.

Parents who view themselves as educational coaches tend to read to their children every day when they are small; when their children get older, they talk with them about their days and about the news around the world. They let their children make mistakes and then get right back to work. They teach them good habits and give them autonomy. They are teachers, too, in other words, and they believe in rigor. They want their children to fail while they are still children. They know that those lessons—about hard work, persistence, integrity, and consequences—will serve a child for decades to come.

For different cultural and historical reasons, most parents in the world's smartest countries seem to understand the importance of academic resilience—the same way American parents understand why coaches bench their sons and daughters when they've missed practice. World-class principals keep parents focused on what matters, even if it means five hundred dollars in lost bake-sale revenue per semester.

ignore shiny objects

Old-school can be good school. Eric's high school in Busan, South Korea, had austere classrooms with bare-bones computer labs. Out front, kids played soccer on a dirt field. From certain angles, the place looked like an American school from the 1950s. Most of Kim's classrooms in Finland looked the same way: rows of desks in front of a simple chalkboard or an old-fashioned white board, the kind that was not connected to anything but the wall.

Tom's school in Poland didn't even have a cafeteria, let alone a state-of-the-art theater, like his public school back home in Pennsylvania. In his American school, *every* classroom had an interactive white board, the kind that had become ubiquitous in so many American schools. (In fact, when I visited Tom's American high school in 2012, these boards were already being swapped for next-generation replacements.) None of the classrooms in his Polish school had interactive white boards.

Little data exists to compare investments in technology across countries, unfortunately. But the anecdotal evidence suggests that Americans waste an extraordinary amount of tax money on high-tech toys for teachers and students, most of which have no proven learning value whatsoever. As in all other industries, computers are most helpful when they save time or money, by helping to sort out what kids know and who needs help. Conversely, giving kids expensive, individual wireless clickers so that they can vote in class would be unthinkable in most countries worldwide. (In most of the world, kids just raise their hands and that works out fine.)

"In most of the highest-performing systems, technology is remarkably absent from classrooms," Andreas Schleicher, the OECD international education guru, told me. "I have no explanation why that is the case, but it does seem that those systems place their efforts primarily on pedagogical practice rather than digital gadgets."

In the survey conducted for this book, seven out of ten international and American exchange students agreed that U.S. schools had

more technology. Not one American student surveyed said there was significantly less technology in U.S. schools.

The smartest countries prioritize teacher pay and equity (channeling more resources to the neediest students). When looking for a world-class education, remember that people always matter more than props.

ask the principal the hard questions

When you meet a principal, ask the questions you might ask a potential employer. Get a sense of the school's priorities and the culture. Don't be afraid to be as assertive as you might be when buying a car or taking a job.

When searching for a school, the leader matters more than any other factor. Yes, the teachers are critically important, too, but you can't pick your child's teacher in our system. So, you have to rely on the principal to do that for you.

How do you choose your teachers?

Finland, Korea, and all the education superpowers select their teachers relatively efficiently, by requiring students accepted to teacher colleges to be in the top third of their graduating high school classes. This selectivity is not enough by itself, but it ensures a level of prestige and education that makes other world-beating policies possible.

Since most countries do *not* take this logical step, the principal is even more important. That leader acts as the filter instead of the education college or the teacher certification system, which is not robust in most places. Nothing matters more than the decisions the principal makes about whom to hire, how to train, and whom to let go. "Great vision without great people is irrelevant," as Jim Collins wrote in his classic book, *Good to Great*.

Find out if the principal can choose which candidates to interview and hire. That kind of common-sense autonomy is rare in many

schools. Then ask if the principal actually watches the job applicant *teach*. That, too, is almost unheard of in many countries including the United States—even though it is an obvious way to see whether a person has the extraordinary leadership abilities required to be a great teacher, one of the most demanding and complex jobs in the modern age. Even if candidates pretend to teach—to an adult audience—as part of the hiring process, that is far better than nothing.

How do you make your teachers better?

The more specifics you hear in response to this question, the better. Most teachers operate without meaningful feedback, in isolation. That is indefensible today. Professional development, which is jargon for training in the education world, should be customized to the strengths and weaknesses of the individual teacher. It should not feature hundreds of teachers sitting through a lecture in an auditorium.

No country has figured this out. But some countries do it better than others. In Finland, teachers are more likely to watch each other teach—in training and throughout their careers. Many countries give teachers more time to collaborate and plan together; the United States ranks poorly in this respect. American teachers work relatively short school years, but they have little time to share ideas and get feedback in most schools. Ask principals how they help teachers collaborate and what kind of leadership roles they give to their top teachers.

How do you measure your success?

Strong leaders can clearly explain their vision. If you hear a long, vague answer, full of many disparate parts, you may have found yourself in a school without a mission—which is to say, an average school. In the United States, most principals will mention test-score data as one measure of success, which is fair but insufficient. They might also mention graduation rates or parental satisfaction surveys.

Fine. But how do they measure the intangible outcomes that mat-

ter just as much? How do they know if they are training students to do higher-order thinking and solve problems they have never seen before? Most standardized tests do not capture those skills. How do they judge if they are teaching kids the secrets behind the world's greatest success stories, skills like persistence, self-control, and integrity?

Do they ask their students what needs to be improved? Do those opinions change the way the school works in fundamental ways—every semester? World-class educators have a vision for where they are going, tools to determine if they have lost their way, and a culture of perpetual change in order to do better.

How do you make sure the work is rigorous enough? How do you keep raising the bar to find out what kids can do?

At the Success Academy charter schools in New York City, students spend an hour and a half reading and discussing books each day. Then they spend another hour and a half writing. Kids start learning science every day in kindergarten. That's what rigor looks like. In most New York City public schools, kids don't learn science daily until middle school.

That's not all. Success Academy students also take music, art, and dance; they learn to play chess. They almost never skip recess, even in bad weather—a policy they share with Finland. They call their strategy “joyful rigor.”

Does this work? All fourth graders at Success Academy schools are proficient in science, according to New York City's test, and 95 percent perform at advanced levels. Success Academy Harlem I, where the mostly low-income students are randomly admitted by lottery, performs at the same level as gifted-and-talented schools across New York City.

Teachers at these schools are expected to be intellectually fascinating and hyper-prepared; they are trained to overestimate what kids can do, rather than worrying about kids' self-esteem. At these schools, kindergarten teachers are forbidden from speaking to children in a singsong voice. It's hard to respect children when you are talking down to them.

"It's an insult to the scholars' intelligence," writes founder and CEO Eva Moskowitz and her co-author Arin Lavinia in their 2012 book, *Mission Impossible*. "What the teacher is saying should be so interesting that the kids are sitting on the edge of their seat, hanging on every word. It's intellectual spark that holds and keeps their attention, not baby talk."

Parental involvement means something different at Success Academies; parents are not asked to bake cookies or sell gift wrap. Instead, they are asked to read to their kids six nights a week. They are expected to help speed the learning at home to get their students ready for college, just as Korean parents do. Parents have the cell phone numbers of their kids' teachers and principal.

In 2011, Success Academy opened a new school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a far richer neighborhood than its previous locations. Unlike most schools in America, including the best public charter schools, these new schools were actually *diverse*, in the literal sense. Moskowitz wanted a true mix of white, Asian, African-American, and Hispanic students at a range of income levels, and she got it. That is how kids learn best—together, with a mix of expectations, advantages, and complications—according to the hard-earned lessons of countries around the world.

There are stories like this all over the country: Success Academy charter schools in New York City, the closest thing to Finland in the United States; William Taylor, a public-school teacher who has almost Korean expectations for his low-income students in Washington, D.C.; and Deborah Gist in Rhode Island, a leader who has dared to raise the bar for what teachers must know, just like reformers in Finland and Korea.

These world-class educators exist, but they are fighting against the grain of culture and institutions. That fight drains them of energy and time. If they ever win, it will be because parents and students rose up around them, convinced that our children cannot only handle a rigorous education but that they crave it as never before.